



## **Shrewsbury Special Education Parent Advisory Council School Committee Report May 4, 2016**

### **Acknowledgements**

- ❖ School Committee
- ❖ Dr. Joe Sawyer
- ❖ Melissa Maguire
- ❖ Special Education Staff
- ❖ PTO Presidents' Council
- ❖ Prior SpedPac
- ❖ Parents and Caregivers

We appreciate this opportunity to present to the School Committee and Dr. Sawyer and are grateful for the welcome we have received from the school community. From our formation at the election held by Ms. Maguire, and at every step along the way, attending our first PTO President's meeting with Dr. Sawyer, launching our survey and hosting our first event, we have learned a great deal and appreciate the support and encouragement we have received.

Thank you to the PTO Presidents' Council for making us feel included and for expressing genuine interest in our group. We would like to recognize the tremendous work of the SpedPAC who came before us and who dedicated years to serving parents and students in our special education community. We are so thankful to Shrewsbury special education families for their responsiveness, feedback, participation and enthusiasm. They are thoughtful, compassionate and tireless advocates, and they are experts in understanding their children's needs.

### **SEPAC Board Members**

- ❖ Bashar Jarkasy, Co-President
- ❖ Sanjiv Lal, Co-President
- ❖ Colleen Corbett, Secretary
- ❖ Rajesh Chug, Treasurer and Technology Expert
- ❖ Jill DeBender, Board Member
- ❖ Blake Poggi, Board Member

### **2015-2016 SEPAC Survey - Goals**

One of our first objectives was to design a survey which would introduce the new SEPAC, announce our Facebook page and email address, establish connections with parents and caregivers in the special education community and help us gain an understanding of families' interests and availability. The information gathered informed the planning of monthly meeting dates, workshops and other opportunities to gather.

Our survey was distributed by Ms. Maguire in November. Respondents provided their contact information if they wished to receive communications directly from the SEPAC in the future. We are careful to maintain the privacy of individual families in our outgoing correspondence.

Most surveys were completed in November and December and we continue to receive responses. The survey link is available on our Facebook page.

### **2015-2016 SEPAC Survey Results - Respondents**

Thank you to our survey participants. The 51 parents and caregivers who have responded thus far represent 6% of the 819 students with disabilities who receive special education services in Shrewsbury this year. Students of survey families attend Parker Road, Paton, Spring Street, Floral Street, Sherwood, Oak and Shrewsbury High School. Respondents indicated their children were in middle (41%), elementary (35%), early childhood (26%) and high school (22%). Two percent selected transition or post-secondary level.

### **2015-2016 SEPAC Survey Results - Top Interests**

Respondents could select more than one

- ❖ 60% selected Parents' Guide to IEPs and 504s
- ❖ 54% IEP Goals and Objectives
- ❖ 50% Social Skills
- ❖ 48% Basic Rights and Special Education Law
- ❖ 48% Reading and Writing

Our events this year and next will center around these topics of interest. Many parents and caregivers expressed the need to learn more about the IEP process, including how to prepare for a Team meeting, convey the needs of their children and build a collaborative rapport with the Team and school representatives. Families also indicated they would like to learn more about the IEP document itself, such as goals and objectives and service delivery. Due to this focus on IEPs, we are planning multiple formats including informational and interactive workshops.

### **2015-2016 SEPAC Survey- Vision**

Our vision in the words of parents:

*The SEPAC should be a more involved, active resource for all parents of kids with special needs. It should be a strong community with its own voice and should help and guide parents to advocate for their children.*

### **Vision of the SEPAC**

Benefits of a strong SEPAC described by families:

- ❖ Sharing
- ❖ Guidance
- ❖ Resources
- ❖ Connections
- ❖ Communication
- ❖ Empathy

*We strive to bring together families of students with diverse needs and diagnoses and offer them a place where they will feel understood and supported.*

## **Event: April 11th Meet & Greet**

- ❖ Introductory meeting
  - Opportunity to socialize, ask questions, share experiences and express concerns
  - Active, honest dialogue
  - Exchanged resources and information
  - Learned from each other
- ❖ Total of 22 attendees
- ❖ Parents and grandparents
- ❖ One family moving from out of state

April 11th was an incredible experience for our group. We are grateful to parents and caregivers for their interest and willingness to join us on a weeknight. They juggled duties at home, stayed for over two hours, asked thought-provoking questions and shared their stories. We have a better sense of our community as a result. This was an opportunity to learn directly from our families how to best support them and serve the needs of their children.

One father drove from New Jersey to attend our meeting as his family is relocating here this summer. Two grandparents shared their experiences and made us more aware of the special challenges they face. Just as every child is unique, every family is unique and we appreciate these stories as we work to make the Shrewsbury SEPAC accessible and helpful to caregivers with a wide range of circumstances.

## **Upcoming Event:**

May 9th Basic Rights Workshop

- ❖ Speaker: Gayle Dublin
- ❖ Positive response from parents  
19 attendees and counting...

Provided through our MassPAC membership and presented by a representative of the Federation for Children with Special Needs. Their literature states:

*This workshop is designed to help parents learn to be effective partners with their child's school to decide their child's eligibility for special education, and to plan, make decisions and monitor their child's progress in school.*

## **SEPAC Participation**

- ❖ Visions of Community conference (VOC2016) in Boston on March 5, 2016  
Sponsored by the Federation for Children with Special Needs  
11,000 participants
- ❖ MassPAC membership and training
- ❖ PTO Presidents' Council quarterly meetings with Dr. Sawyer
- ❖ Search committee for the new Director of Special Education and Pupil Personnel Services on March 24 & 25, 2016
- ❖ Coordinated Program Review (special education program audit) on April 13, 2016
- ❖ Northborough/Southborough (NSPAC) presentations:
  - *Introduction to the Transition Planning Process* on November 15, 2015
  - *The Most Common Cause of OCD and Anxiety that Your Pediatrician Has not Heard of...P.A.N.D.A.S* on April 27, 2016

This year, our SEPAC board and members had multiple opportunities to attend meetings and events within our community, in neighboring communities and at the state level. Bashar participated in the Visions of Community conference and a workshop entitled, Building a Better SEPAC for Your Community which included strategies for recruitment, networking, building relationships with schools, developing partnerships within the community, increasing diversity, increasing disability awareness, advocating for families and providing input to the District.

Our participation in the PTO Presidents' Council meetings and the search committee for the special education director position was due to invitations and coordination through Ms. Maguire, Dr. Sawyer, Ms. Cantin, and Ms. Malone. Thank you for these opportunities to join with and support our school community. Through these experiences, we represented Shrewsbury special education students and families, gained a broader perspective and stayed informed of important developments. We also attended events hosted by neighboring PACs as we can learn from and help each other.

## **Areas of Concern**

### **Budget**

- ❖ Loss of elementary level director position
- ❖ Loss of Sherwood special education teacher and reading teacher
- ❖ Reduction in mental health resources
- ❖ Reduction in paraprofessional and ABA tech hours

SEPAC members have followed the efforts of Dr. Sawyer, Mr. Collins, Ms. Maguire and their teams to explain and reduce the budget gap. We appreciate your transparency as well as the open decision-making process of the School Committee through questions, discussions and consideration of input from the community.

We also appreciate the acknowledgement of the impact of staffing changes on students with special needs, including the importance of reading support at Sherwood, the value for consistent staffing at morning and afternoon transition times, and the increased burden placed on building staff to support students during mental health crises. Given these challenges, we would like to ask how we can help support families, school personnel and administrators and are always open to joining in endeavors to promote the success of students and their schools.

### **Considerations based on families' concerns**

- ❖ Planning for special education students in future curriculum changes
- ❖ Promotion of students' social/emotional wellbeing
- ❖ Individualized services for students based on their unique needs
- ❖ Increased collaborative role of parents and caregivers on the IEP Team

In March, we received an email from a parent and former educator regarding the film, *Most Likely to Succeed*. We asked permission to share her questions because she so articulately outlined the concerns of families while also conveying their interest in changes which move everyone forward.

*I firmly believe project based learning is far more meaningful than simply test taking. However, many of our students that receive supports would need to relearn how school works (expectations, etc.). Is there someone who can advocate on their behalf should the District decide to change their instructional approach? And also ensure that our children are not left out of the most engaging experiences because they require accommodation and support? I am not implying that they would be negatively affected, [but] I am unaware of the structures in place.*

This parent's questions represent a great starting point for dialog with students, families and schools if this learning model were considered in the future. Parents and caregivers also asked informed questions about the law and implications of recent decisions which impact special education. The above categories are drawn from concerns expressed during our April 11th meeting and via email. When particular groups are described by parents and caregivers, such as children with dyslexia or students whose social/emotional development does not match their academic performance, we hope to work to better understand their students' needs and collaborate with the District to address their unique challenges and build upon their strengths.

### **Looking Forward**

- ❖ Welcome new Director of Special Education, Meg Belsito
- ❖ Hold SEPAC elections in the fall
- ❖ Stay connected to our school community
  - School Committee meetings
  - PTO Presidents' Council
  - Utilize technology to disseminate information
- ❖ Partner with neighboring SEPACs
  - Northborough/Southborough, Wachusett, Assabet Valley Regional High School

Parents are interested in the steps we are taking to communicate with the new director and we look forward to inviting her to meet with our group and our families. We are working to build partnerships at many levels within the structure of the Special Education Department and the larger Shrewsbury Public Schools community as well as in surrounding towns.

### **SEPAC Goals**

- ❖ Establish vibrant forum for parents and caregivers in the Shrewsbury special education community
- ❖ Offer multiple opportunities for families to socialize and participate through meetings, workshops and coffee hours
- ❖ Provide resources and assistance to parents to help them navigate the system and simplify challenges
- ❖ Actively reach families and address their questions and concerns via social media and email
- ❖ Build new avenues of communication and collaboration with school professionals and administrators

### **Modes of Communication**

- ❖ [shrewsbury.SEPAC@gmail.com](mailto:shrewsbury.SEPAC@gmail.com)
- ❖ <http://www.facebook.com/ShrewsburySEPAC>